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MI5 forced me to talk, says spy suspect

by Simon Freeman and Barrie Penrose

A FORMER government scientist, who has been publicly named in the past months as a likely member of the Russian spy ring operated by Anthony Blunt, has spoken for the first time about the allegations. Alistair Watson, a former Cambridge don who once worked in secret defence research, told The Sunday Times that he was completely innocent, although he admits that British intelligence had had good reason to suspect him.

MI5 officers who interrogated Watson in 1967 believed that, in the course of the interviews, Watson had revealed more about Russian spying operations than he could have learnt had he been innocent. More particularly, perhaps as a result of Watson's wish to help at the time, the intelligence officers believe he had actually identified two Russian case officers who had controlled Blunt.

Watson, who is 73 and now lives quietly at Hindhead, in Surrey, came under suspicion in the early 1960s after two other Cambridge men, Blunt and Leo Long, confessed to MI5 that they had spied for the Russians. Watson says that he was "ruthlessly pressured" during several weeks of interrogation. At one stage, fearing that he was so confused that he was saying things he did not really mean, he asked to see a psychiatrist.

Although Watson cannot recall ever confessing to the MI5 interrogators, the effect of the interviews on his career was immediate. MI5 clearly believed that Watson had given what amounted to a confession and he lost his top-security clearance. He was moved from defence research to a mundane job at the National Institute of Ocean-

His statement to us, made through his solicitor, Geoffrey Bindman, seems likely to provoke further questions about the efficiency of British intelligence's counter-subversion techniques. If Watson is telling the truth, then the episode would lend weight to the allegations that British intelligence was in such disarray after the defections of Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean and Kim Philby to the Soviet Union that MI5 simply did not know who was a spy and who was not. Watson himself told us that he had the feeling during his interrogations that there was no one really in charge of the investigation.

Watson, who has never commented before on allegations that he spied for Russia, would certainly have seemed a prime suspect as MI5 tried to discover how far the spy ring had extended. He had been a don at Cambridge during the 1930s and had been friendly with Blunt. And, like Blunt, he had been a communist and a member of the Apostles, the secret debating society, many of whose members were committed marxists. But, unlike Blunt or Burgess, Watson was never a homosexual.

In 1963 an American, Michael Straight, who had once been asked by Blunt to supply him with information, identified a number of possible Russian agents to British intelligence. Straight recalls giving three names in particular: Blunt, Long, who confessed last Sunday to having spied for the Russians, and Watson. But he insists that he had simply named potential spies of whose guilt he was not certain.

According to a recent book on MI5 by Nigel West, a few weeks

after Blunt and Long had confessed in 1964, Watson was interviewed at Brown's Hotel in London. Watson flatly denies that this interview ever took place.

There is no argument, however, from Watson about what happened in 1967. He told us that he was interrogated by MI5 over several weeks. "I think that when they started off, they knew that I had contacts with others who had confessed," he says. "They were reasonably justified in suspecting that I might be a spy. Their technique was to pressure me to confess without ever specifying what they wanted me to confess to."

Watson admits that he felt under pressure. MI5 would ask him to interrogations several days running and would then leave him alone for a few days before starting the process again. "I was incoherent because of the pressure and because of the anxiety over my former friends having apparently been involved with spying."

He insists that he was "never guilty of passing any classified information to any unauthorised person." He says: "I am not and never have been a Soviet spy."

(As Received)